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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women

Statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, the Christian Children's Fund, the International Council of Jewish Women, the International Federation of University Women, the League of Women Voters of the United States, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts and the World Federation of Methodist Women, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; and the Armenian Relief Society and the International Union for Health Education, non-governmental organization on the Roster of the Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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Girls: the women of tomorrow

In 1995, girls won their place on the agenda of the Fourth World Conference on Women in chapter IV.L of the Beijing Platform for Action. Chapter IV.L makes a significant pledge to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child — specifically addressing education, violence, economic exploitation, harmful cultural attitude and practices. It promises to strengthen families, promote girls' awareness and participation in their own lives and in their societies. Its very existence acknowledges that women's advancement is not sustainable without attention to the rights of girls.

At the five-year review of the outcome of the implementation of the Fourth World Conference on Women, we must recognize that many Governments have made far too little progress in turning their promises into reality. Resistance to change and lack of political will are demonstrated by inequitable resource allocation and ineffective implementation of laws and policies. In addition, the growing economic and social impact of globalization, debt burdens and free-market policies have compounded the problems of poverty and marginalization of girls.

It is important to remind ourselves that girls are not yet women. They are children with special rights and needs that must be heeded if girls of today are to become healthy, contributing women leaders of tomorrow. Girls are doubly impacted by age and gender bias and doubly disadvantaged by the negative interplay of discrimination and poverty. For example, two thirds of the 130 million children not enrolled in school are girls.

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Despite laws and a growing world consciousness, violence and exploitation of girls are rampant and often occur with impunity. Violence can do irreparable harm to girls' developing bodies, minds and emotional capacities. It leaves them without the ability to concentrate or stay in school, and denies them the self-confidence and self-respect they need to take their rightful place in the world. Among the most damning aspect of violence against girls is that in far too many places, it is still denied, unacknowledged or accepted as normal behaviour.

In situations of armed conflict, including refugee camps, girls are frequently deliberate military targets of systematic rape, abduction and murder. Infanticide, female genital mutilation, honour killings, acid throwing and a host of other heinous acts are often socially approved. The huge scope of incest and sexual abuse of young girls by family members and trusted adults is only now just beginning to be known. The often slave-like conditions of domestic work and recruitment for prostitution in many garment and carpet factories are considered normal terms of employment for girls. A lack of education leaves girls vulnerable to violence.

An increasing by-product of poverty, exploitation and violence against girls is their high vulnerability to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. UNAIDS research confirms that girls are infected at a higher rate than women and women at a higher rate than men. They must live not only with the devastating health impact but with the stigma, isolation and rejection of their families and communities. Moreover, after losing one or more family members to AIDS, many girls are forced to take on the adult role of caretaker or head of households.

How then is it possible for girls to grow into resourceful and independent women?

Girls already have demonstrated the will, energy, creativity and endurance to improve their lives. Governments must commit the will and the resources to keep their promises made at Beijing.

It is common knowledge that education is the single most effective intervention that can propel girls out of poverty and enable them to gain the skills and capacities to develop to their full potential. Governments must provide full access to all levels of quality education from early childhood through 18 years of age.

We know that girls need and have the right to a safe and supportive environment that includes nurturing and guidance from families and caring adults. Families must have social and economic support to provide for and protect their children.

Girls have shown repeatedly that their participation in decisions affecting them through youth organizations, schools, families and communities is crucial in nurturing resiliency and developing their self-esteem and leadership. Programmes designed around the principle of participation must be encouraged and implemented.

We have seen successful partnerships between NGOs and Governments provide the best insurance that girl-friendly policies and resource allocation are effectively implemented. NGOs, particularly the small, grass-roots, not-for-profit direct service agencies, are isolated and disconnected from government policies and initiatives. Governments have many resources and NGOs often have the grass-roots expertise to implement policies. We call on Governments to increase their outreach to NGOs.

Social attitudes, traditional practices and cultural values have a huge impact on the life of the girl child. Harmful attitudes are often so entrenched, hidden and persistent that they are nearly impossible to root out. Successful campaigns around issues like female genital mutilation have led to significant improvement in the life of girls in many places. Governments must make unyielding efforts to raise awareness among all sectors of society at all levels about the harmful impact of negative attitudes and behaviour on girls.

Disaggregated data by age as well as gender is essential for implementing and monitoring progress. Adequate research does not yet exist. Government practices should include gathering of data by age and gender, and Governments should seek such data from NGOs.

To fulfil the promise of the Fourth World Conference on Women to the girl child, we must all take our commitments seriously. We must value the girl child. "If tomorrow's woman is to become an equal partner with men," one African NGO has stated, "there is a great need to accord the girl child her rightful share of dignity and opportunity — today".